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EDITORIAL AND COMMENTARIES

Fearing Growing Old

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Toward the end of 2003, the United States was embroiled in a polarized debate about an end-of-life decision—in this instance, the withdrawal of life support for a woman in a persistent vegetative state. In the United Kingdom, that matter was sorted out some years ago, and the necessary legal consent no longer attracts the publicity of the earliest cases. Euthanasia and assisted suicide, on the other hand, remain illegal within the borders of the United Kingdom, and the path taken by the Netherlands and some other European countries has not been followed, not yet anyway.

However, death does not seem to have quite the hold over people that it once had. These days, it is old age that is more fear inducing, and those fears are by no means restricted to middle-aged individuals looking at retirement and beyond. Governments are petrified by the implications of the demographics. They also can get pretty scared of the political clout of those with gray hair. The possibility that people might have to work to 70 years of age here in Britain (normal retirement here is at 65 years old, but in practice, it is often earlier) is being seriously debated. State provision of more and more basic pensions for more years worries governments, and in the private sector, the traditional employment-related schemes yielding inflation-protected pensions linked to final salary are struggling under the twin pressures of poorly performing stock markets and longer-living recipients of the pensions.

Perhaps it was always thus. The Russian-born immunologist Elie Metchnikoff, who died in 1916, noted in his book *The Prolongation of Life*[1] that "Already it is complained that the burden of supporting old people is too heavy, and statesmen are perturbed by the enormous expense which will be entailed by state support of the aged." No wonder governments are keen to emphasize the quality of life of older people rather than the mere length of it.

Programs such as the Experience Corps,[2,3,4,5] which endeavors to use the wisdom and experience of older people to benefit others such as schoolchildren, are the focus of four articles in this issue of *Journal of Urban Health*. The start of the United Kingdom's Experience Corps, which has government backing, began in 2001. However, even if the benefit is mutual (i.e., the elderly participants gain as well as give), these programs can only scratch the surface of the problem.

In Europe, the proportion of the population aged 60 years or older rose from 15.5% to 21.5% in the four decades to the year 2000; by 2040, a figure of 33.4% is projected.[6] As I am 64 years old, I am not, of course, going to concede that 60 years old is "elderly," but most of the individuals in that 33.4% are not going to be contributing actively to the economy.

In southern Europe, the sunnier, more Mediterranean part, support for older people has traditionally been the extended family, a solution that works best in

stable, and rural, communities in which birth and death and life events in-between take place within a radius of a few kilometers or even in the same building. This pattern long ago disappeared in the United Kingdom, and it may be changing elsewhere. During the heat waves of the 2003 summer holidays, newspapers reported unusual numbers of old people dying, alone, in French cities.

The British gerontologist Tom Kirkwood has tried to fuse the biology and sociology of aging and come up with practical tips for a healthier old age, but his book[7] ends with a bizarre fictional scenario involving programmed death. The decline of our body systems can only be postponed; if people do live longer by taking care of themselves from retirement onward, those "extra" years will need financial support, followed in the end by expensive and often palliative management of the unavoidable cancers, strokes, and cognitive losses. Governments and citizens alike, understandably, are anxious, and medicine may not be able to help them.

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